

“Knowing the Future?”

Mark 13:1-8

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Would you like to know the future? We dream about it, we plan for it, we sometimes dread it. Wouldn't life be a whole lot easier if you knew what was coming? Part of our human nature is wanting to make sense of the unknown. We don't like what we don't know and can't control, so we do everything in our human power to find out what's coming so that we can be prepared for it.

Sometimes we try to use things beyond our human power. How else can you explain the popularity of fortune tellers and psychic hotlines? And yet, I believe we all know the limits of those kinds of powers. When Dionne Warwick's Psychic Friends Network filed for bankruptcy, the newspaper headline said, "They should have seen it coming." Another newspaper advertisement made this statement: "Clairvoyance Society of Greater London will not meet today due to unforeseen circumstances."

And here's a question: do we really want to know what's coming? Deep down, knowing the cruelty and capriciousness of life's circumstances, do we really want to know the future holds? A frog went into see a fortune teller. The madame gazed into her crystal ball and said, "Mmm. Aaah. I see a beautiful young woman in your future who will take a great interest in you." "Really?" the frog said excitedly. "Where will I meet her? A bar? The park?" "No," said the fortune teller. "In a biology class." Do we really want to know the future?

The disciples decided they wanted to know, so in chapter 13 of Mark's gospel they try to turn Jesus into Nostradamus and have him predict the future. After Jesus warns of the Temple's destruction, an event which many Jews believed would signal the beginning of the Final Judgment, the disciples ask, "When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?"

Jesus' answers to those questions have been fertile soil for people fascinated with the end of the world. People in every generation have predicted the end times and the second coming of the Messiah, but they all share one flaw, which was pointed out by a cartoon in the New Yorker. It shows a bearded, flowing-robed prophetic type carrying a sign down a busy sidewalk that read, "Yesterday in this space I predicted that the world would come to an end. It did not, however. I regret an inconvenience this may have caused." Everyone who has predicted the end of the world has been wrong. And while some of them have been faithful people doing their best to live out God's word, others of them...well, let's just say this: Some people try to simplify everything and put it all into a nutshell, but the only thing in the nutshell is a nut.

The idea of the second coming of Jesus was a huge issue in the time that the Gospel of Mark was written, about 30-40 years after the resurrection. People were experiencing some of the very signs Jesus was talking about, and it was believed that his second coming was literally going to be any day. While the idea of Jesus' return was a hot-button issue in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it's lost some of its power by now. After all, it's 2000 years later and we're still here. Do we begin to doubt the accuracy of Jesus' words? Has there been a time in history where there hasn't been wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nations, earthquakes and famine? And yet, we're still here.

In our modern times, this idea of a second coming is dealt with in two extremes. On one extreme, it becomes the driving force behind a person's belief, to the point that nothing else matters. These folks see every world crisis as a sign of the apocalypse, and they use this text to sow terror and to scare people into belief.

The other extreme, one to which I honestly relate more easily, is to simply ignore this idea that the world will end when Jesus comes again. It may have been a powerful motivator in Mark's time, but in our world of practicality and modern progress, it just doesn't make a whole lot of sense. So we do our best to live lives as we've been instructed by Christ, and skip over the parts of the Bible like chapter 13 of Mark.

My guess is that more of us fall more into the second category than the first. In the more mainline denominations like ours, much more time is spent on how our lives should be lived than on how they could possibly end. So what do we do with this idea that Jesus is going to come again, that there will be an apocalypse, a Judgment Day?

First we need to clarify what Jesus said so that we have a better understanding. Jesus warns his disciples about false prophets, people claiming to be the Messiah and claiming to have special knowledge. He says that there will be wars and rumors of wars, that nation will rise against nation, that there will be earthquakes and famines. I remember in high school a movie came out called "The Seventh Sign," starring Demi Moore. She played a pregnant woman who has these end-of-the-world visions related to her unborn child. And there's this mystery guy who shows up in different parts of the world, breaking open these ancient seals and unleashing things like wars and famines and earthquakes. It got me thinking about what the Second Coming would be like, probably the same effect the "Left Behind" book series has on people today.

But Jesus' response to all our popular prognostications of what Judgment Day will be like is simply, "That's not what you're looking for." He says that all these things that people have been interpreting for centuries as roadmaps to the end of the world – wars, earthquakes, and such – are not maps at all. "Such things must happen," Jesus says, "but the end is yet to come." This is an important distinction Jesus is making here. This is not fortune-telling; this is teaching about living faithfully while waiting.

You can't blame people for being fascinated with this idea, because it is so intriguing. But on a deeper level, I wonder if people don't actually long for some sort of judgment day, because that would prove once and for all that God does have a plan for us. The catastrophes of life sometimes seem so random and unfair that many of us yearn for some sign, any sign, that God is still in control of this mess. It's sometimes hard to believe that when the world around us crumbles like the stones of the Temple.

I think that's one of the reasons so many people disregard this idea of a second coming. We've seen the wars and catastrophes and falling buildings, but we're still here. Pastor Fred Craddock asks, "Could it be that people aren't interested in the Second Coming because they're still disappointed with the first?" Jesus came as a Savior, but there's still disease and death and dishonesty. We haven't experienced the end of the world on a global level, but we've experienced it over and over on a personal one.

Do you remember feeling like your world was coming to an end? It doesn't take a war to trigger that. It can be a single word. Cancer. Divorce. Downsizing. Life is great, and then, in the blink of an eye, or over an agonizing period of time, the magnificent temple that is our life comes crashing down around us, no stone left standing on top of

another. How can I go on? Nothing will ever be the same. My world is ending. What did the first coming of Jesus offer us that should make us care about the second one?

Notice back in chapter 13 how Jesus describes the coming of the apocalypse. He names several terrifying, life-shaking signs, and says that all these things that will take place are a sign of what? Not of the end. You'd think these things would mean the end, don't you? But Jesus says they are the sign of the birth, a new beginning.

There's a reason that the birth process is called labor. It takes a lot of work to give new life to something. There's screaming and sweating and loads of medication, and that's just for the husband. The end result of creation is beautiful, but the path there can be fraught with anguish and pain. When our daughters sit down with crayons or glitter glue or watercolors, Leigh and I throw down a few newspapers and run for cover.

Creation can be messy. But the end result is always beautiful to us, a new creation.

Whether we are waiting for the end to this earthly world, or struggling through what feels like the end of our personal world, Jesus words are the same. He says that there is something new about to be born. It's not going to be easy; there will be pain and suffering to go through. At times it may be hard to see the end. At times you may want to give up. But be patient. Endure. Trust that God is with you. A wise person once said, "There are no hopeless situations, only those who don't have hope." If at times you feel like your world is ending, realize that what may be happening is that something new might be beginning.

This message couldn't be more appropriate at this time of year, as we get set to begin the season of Advent. The season of Advent is a season of waiting, a season of anticipation, as we prepare our hearts for the arrival of the Christ child. Some would argue that Christmas has become a mess of materialism and me-first mentalities, but as Christians, we simply cannot forget what we're waiting for. In the midst of our struggles and tribulations, we come to Advent expectant, because we are awaiting a birth, for Christ to come again into our lives. He brings with him the greatest gift of all: he brings hope. What are you hoping for in your life, in this world? That's why the first coming is so important that we celebrate it each year. Hope will be born again.